

[Chapter Three]

A Series of Goods

I. Goods, in Order

One begins to appreciate the reasons for the wide divergence of attitudes we witness in the reception of *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6 immediately upon turning to its very first argument, the peculiarity of which is plain even upon a cursory inspection. It is arrestingly brief; and it is opaque in its brevity. The more one excavates its probable meaning, the clearer it becomes that it telescopes a great deal of Academic doctrine, some of which can be gleaned only by inference and conjecture, if it is not simply inaccessible to us. The argument has only two premises: (i) there are no Forms over items arranged in a series; and (ii) good things are arranged in a series (*EN* i 6 1096a17-23). From just these two premisses, it follows that there is no Form of the Good.

So stated, the argument is at least plainly valid. Matters take on a perplexing hue, however, as soon as we attempt to determine why anyone might believe either of its premisses. Indeed, it is immediately surprising that Aristotle represents the first premiss as already accepted by the Platonists. That is, unlike the other arguments in the chapter, Aristotle offers this argument as co-opting a settled Platonic doctrine for deployment against them. As Aristotle represents the situation, the Academics join

with him in holding that there are no Forms set over items arranged in a series. He then turns their agreement against them by contenting that they are therefore in no position to subscribe to a Form of the Good. For since, Aristotle urges, good things are arranged in some manner of series, an Academic will be constrained to agree that there can be no Form over them, even on the assumption that there are Forms set over other, non-serially arranged particulars. The argument is thus at least to this degree *ad hominem*: according to Aristotle, Plato's own commitments serve to show up the falsity of his adherence to the Form of the Good.

In assessing this argument, we proceed in four stages. We begin by stating and analyzing the argument as it is presented in *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6, while clearing the ground and settling some preliminary issues. So presented, the argument is almost wholly inadequate—to such a degree, in fact, that this already gives us reason to suppose that this cannot be the whole of the story. Fortunately, a parallel passage in *Eudemian Ethics* i 8 provides some additional data which serves to rescue the argument from the shortcomings of the version extracted from *Nicomachean Ethics*. Based upon the treatment of the *Eudemian Ethics*, the argument may then be expanded, with a view towards reappraisal.

In contrast with the truncated version, the more sophisticated formulation reveals a good deal more structure behind Aristotle's objection to Plato. Unfortunately, it too, for subtler reasons, falls wide of its mark. Even so, one might, by releasing on

both texts in conjunction, hazard a conjecture about the source of Aristotle's confidence regarding goods and series. For once we have shown it in its best, textually-anchored version, the argument against there being a Form set over a series of goods proves entirely reasonable, though not entirely devastating. It is not that Plato, or a Platonist, will face no issue regarding goods and series. On the contrary, Aristotle's argument turns out to raise a familiar problem for a Platonist regarding the explanatory efficacy of the theory of Forms. If this is so, however, then it is not really peculiar to the Form of the Good.

If this general reconstruction is correct, Aristotle's complaint about the Form of the Good in this first argument turns out to be not so much a complaint about the Form of *Goodness*, but about there being a *Form* of Goodness, one which plays the explanatory role Plato would like to see it play. Indeed, Aristotle's argument against a series of goods proves to be a special case of a broader argument against all Forms, and not merely an argument against the Form of Goodness *per se*. The criticisms launched against the Form of the Good are thus peculiar neither to Goodness nor even to Forms arrayed over series. Even so, the fact that good things form a series plays a crucial role in Aristotle's criticism of the Form of the Good, even if this role requires supplementation by other common anti-Platonic theses. This in a way should turn out to be a welcome result for those sympathetic to Aristotle's anti-Platonic animadversions.

For his argument against a series of goods proves to be but one of several trained on the same destination, namely a dismissal of the Form of the Good.

II. A Complicated Simple Argument in *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6

Aristotle's first argument against Plato's Form of the Good in *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6 is deceptively simple in presentation; in fact, it proves concise to the point of obscurity.

Immediately after expressing his rueful duty to piety, Aristotle says:

Those who advanced this view did not produce Ideas for those cases in which they said there was a prior and a posterior; and this is the very reason they did not furnish an Idea in the case of numbers. Yet the good is spoken of in the <category of > *what it is* (τί ἐστί; *scil.* substance), and in quality and in relative; and what is in its own right, that is, substance, is by nature prior to the relative, for this seems to be an offshoot and something co-incident with being, so that there would be no common idea over these (*EN* i 6 1096a17-23).

In its simplest formulation, the argument closest to the text here is easy to state, but hard to fathom:

- (1) Where things $\phi_1, \phi_2, \dots, \phi_n$ are related as prior and posterior (πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον), there is no Form ϕ -ness set over them.
- (2) Good things are related as prior and posterior.
- (3) So, there is no Form Goodness set over good things.

What might be said on behalf of either of these premisses?

Beginning with the second, we are initially left perplexed. If we consider a random variety of good things, or, to put matters in a linguistic idiom, if we consider a random set of things of which we predicate ‘. . . is good’,¹ we discern no immediate ordering. Consider, for instance, the sentences:

- Gelato on a hot evening in Germany is always good.
- Well, no-one can deny that Damrau’s rendition of Strauss’s *Morgen* is good.
- Some shortcuts are good—some are just shortcuts. This one is good.
- Spite is soul-draining and self-destructive; genuine forgiveness is, well, good.

The four general kinds of things here called good—evening treats in Germany, renditions of Lieder, directions of travel, and psychological processes—are all, let us agree, good things. But they stand in no discernible ordering relation. Certainly they are not readily likened to the series of numbers, to which Aristotle implicitly does liken good things when he notes that ‘this is the very reason they [*scil.* the Academics] did not establish an Idea of numbers.’ If we take the comparison to the number series at face value, then we should expect each predication of goodness to stand in some determinate priority-posteriority relation to every other, such that each has a fixed and

¹ In speaking of ‘predicates’ in this connection, we may adopt a linguistic idiom for clarity or ease of expression, but in each case we should bear in mind that Plato is ultimately thinking in metaphysical terms, as we can surmise from *Republic* 596a and especially *Parmenides* 130e-131a: ‘So, tell me this: is it your view that, as you say, there are certain Forms whose names these other things have through getting a share of them as, for instance, they came to be like by getting a share of Likeness, large by getting a share of Largeness, and just and beautiful by getting a share of Justice and Beauty?’ ‘It certainly is,’ Socrates replied.

unalterable position in a determinate, changeless series. It is difficult to fathom how one could even begin to construct an argument for any such view. It seems patently outlandish.

Fortunately, as Aristotle's own brief illustration indicates, in thinking of the orderings of good things, he is not taking the comparison to the number series at face value. Rather, he is contending that predications of goodness, like the numbers, stand to one another in priority and posterity relations, a thesis which is compatible with the thought that predications of goodness collect themselves into kinds, such that some kinds are, along some dimension to be specified, prior to others, while others are posterior to them. Consistent with this picture, some kinds of goods could be prior to all other kinds, others posterior to all other kinds, and some prior to some and posterior to others. On the assumption that a suitable priority relation could be specified, this would suffice to justify a general comparison with the number series, for which, we are told, not even the Platonists want Forms.

On the assumption that this general orientation is correct, there remains the task of specifying the priority and posteriority relations obtaining between kinds of good things. Here too Aristotle provides at least a suggestion within this brief passage. He appeals to the doctrine of categories, contending that substances are 'prior in nature' (πρῶτερον κατὰ φύσιν) to other categories of beings, like qualities or relations. This specifies the priority relation clearly as a familiar sort of priority, namely priority in

nature, as it obtains in the categories, where his form of priority receives a full (if disputed²) characterization in *Metaphysics* Δ. There it is explicitly aligned with priority in substance (κατὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐσίαν; *Met.* Δ 11, 1019a1-2). More fully:

Some things are called prior and posterior in this way, while others are called so in nature and substance, those for which it is possible to be without other things, but not the latter without them (*Met.* Δ 11, 1019a1-4).³

At least initially, this passage seems to gloss priority in nature or substance in terms of an asymmetry of existence implication: *a* is prior to *b* just in case (i) *a* can exist without *b*, while (ii) *b* cannot exist without *a*. Thus, to take an illustration initially favourable to this way of understanding priority in nature and substance, Socrates can exist without his pallor, while his pallor cannot exist without him. Generalizing, then, substances can exist without their intrinsic accidents whereas intrinsic accidents cannot exist without the substances of which they are predicated.

Applying this understanding to the case at hand, we might be inclined to think that predications of goodness in the category of substance are prior in nature to

² See Peramatzis (2011), with the review of Malink (2013) for various understandings of Aristotle's notion of priority in nature. I here accept, without argument, the traditional understanding, which has been discussed and criticised by Peramatzis. As far as the argument of this paper is concerned, the same results could be attained, in a more round-about way, by accepting Peramatzis's interpretation and making the necessary adjustments.

³ In the *Physics*, we find priority in nature not so closely connected to priority in substance: 'A thing is said to be prior to other things when, if it is not, the others will not be, whereas it can be without the others; and there is also priority in time and priority in substance (κατ' οὐσίαν). (*Phys.* viii 7, 260b17-19).

predications of goodness in other categories of being. So, for instance, Aristotle mentions the non-substantial categories of quality and relative (*πρός τι*), where a relative, we know from *Categories* 7, is one of a pair of correlatively existing beings, each of whose existence implies the existence of the other, and indeed, each of whose definitions or accounts must mention the existence of the others (*Cat.* 7, 8a28-34).⁴ So, for instance, slaves and masters are relatives, since there are no slaves without masters and no masters without slaves, and, moreover, to provide an account (a *λόγος*) of the one requires mentioning, at least implicitly, the other. Tracing this same thought a bit further, one might say that the goodness of substance is prior to the goodness of non-substance in the way that relatives are posterior to substances. That is, just as nothing is a slave without first being some particular human being, a substance, perhaps no quality or relative is good, thinks Aristotle, without there being a good substance realising that quality. To begin again with a favourable illustration, one might say that the virtues are good, but that a given virtue, like courage, is good only when it is realised by a good human being, like Socrates. Thus on this approach, one might attempt, in effect, to allow the priority relations among predications of goodness to supervene on the priority relations of the categories. This yields the following argument, also close to the text, but now a bit more expansive:

⁴ Closer to Aristotle's actual formulation: x is a relative (*πρός τι*) =_{df} what it is for x to be F is the same as what it is for x to stand in R to y . The locution 'what it is for x to be F ' implies the notion of an essence-specifying account.

- (1) Beings in the category of substance (οὐσίαι) are called good.
- (2) Beings in the categories of (a) quality (ποιός) and (b) relative (πρός τι) are called good.
- (3) Substances are prior in nature (πρότερον κατὰ φύσιν) to qualities and relatives.
- (4) If substances are prior in nature to the other categories of being, and if ϕ is predicated of substances and beings in the other categories of being, then the ϕ substances are prior to the ϕ non-substances.
- (5) So, good things are related as prior and posterior.

The conclusion of this mildly expanded argument then provides all the reason we might need to accept our second premise, namely that good things are arranged in a series. It might be a short series, beginning with substances and ending with non-substances, but a short series is a series all the same. In any event, this is just what Aristotle seems to imply when he explicates the priority of substances with regard to relatives by noting that ‘the latter seems like an offshoot co-incident with what is [*scil.* with the former, namely substance, or οὐσία]’ (EN i 6, 1096a22-23).

Unfortunately, this suggestion advances the discussion but little. To begin, it is unclear why the case of virtue, if it is itself a suitable illustration of the contention Aristotle is meaning to advance here, should be thought to generalize. If we consider a slave named Marcus, we might predicate pallor of him in at least two ways, by saying

(i) 'Marcus is pale.' or (ii) 'The slave is pale.' One feels no inclination, however, to think that the second predication is somehow unlike the first, or so still less to think that it is posterior to it. Pallor is pallor, and both instances of its predication, both equally in the category of quality, seem plainly on par.

Indeed, Aristotle himself seems to concede precisely this point when averring that whiteness is predicated univocally irrespective of its subject. This he does when setting a dilemma as a rejoinder to a Platonic response to his basic argument against the univocity of goodness. He imagines a Platonist complaining that the Academic view is restricted to intrinsic goods, such that only things good in their own right are univocally good (goods καθ' αὐτά). On this approach, the Form of the Good corresponds univocally only to intrinsic predications of goodness (*EN* i 6, 1096b7-13). Aristotle's response:

'Which goods should one regard as goods in their own right (καθ' αὐτά)?

Those pursued even when considered individually, like intelligence, seeing, certain pleasures, and honours? For even if we pursue these because of something else, one would none the less regard them as goods in their own right. Or is nothing good in its own right beyond the Idea (ιδέα) <of the Good>? If the latter, the Form (εἶδος) <of the Good> will be otiose. If the former, and these are counted as among things good in their own right, then the account of goodness (τὸν τἀγαθοῦ λόγον) in all of them will need to be shown to be the

same, just as the account of whiteness is the same in snow and in white

lead.' (EN i 6, 1096b16-24)

So, whiteness remains univocal irrespective of its subject of predication, and so, presumably, remains univocal when predicated of Marcus (the slave), and the slave (Marcus). This remains true even if we are perfectly content to agree that since a slave is a relative (a πρὸς τι), nothing is a slave without first being a human being (an οὐσία), and indeed even if we regard substances and relatives as standing in some discernible priority-posteriority relation. In sum, φ-entities can be ordered as prior and posterior, without being prior and posterior *qua*-φ. Consequently, if this approach correctly explicates Aristotle's appeal to the categories in this connection, then he appears guilty of either conflating subjects of predications with the predications of which they are subjects or wrongly presuming priority-posteriority relations obtaining between subjects of predications to determine supervening priority-posteriority relations among their predications.

One might grant this, and still hold out hope for Aristotle's argument. For the case of goodness may seem more complicated. If we say (i) Marcus is good, we seem to say something unlike what we say when we say (ii) the slave is good. We may, that is, implicitly be presuming that the predicate '... is good' in these applications functions in the manner denominated by Geach as implicitly attributive.⁵ According to Geach, every

⁵ Geach (1956, 65). For a fuller discussion of Geach, see Chapter Four §IV.

sentence of the structure: 'x is good' is implicitly an abridged sentence of the form 'x is a good ϕ ' where ϕ is some sortal or other. Thus, 'a is a good' when said of Abe the baker, means, assuming various contextual facts, 'Abe is a good baker,' from which we could not infer that Abe was a good father or a good driver or, most generally, a good man. In Geach's view, this is a completely general phenomenon.⁶ Indeed, in his rather extreme appeal to the attributive-predicative distinction, the predicate '...is good' is always spurious: 'There is no such thing as being just good or bad, there is only being a good or bad so and so.' There is no such thing, that is, as a purely predicative '... good.'

If something like this contention is underlying Aristotle's reservations about the univocity of goodness, then (on the assumption that there is something to Geach's contention) turn-about would now be fair-play. For Aristotle might now reasonably protest that it is the Platonist who only haphazardly generalizes; perhaps it is true that whiteness predicates univocally of the categories, but this would by itself give us no reason to suppose that goodness follows suit. On the contrary, if all goodness is attributive goodness, then all goodness would be sortally-bound, such that the full range of intrinsic goods, however many they may be, will be good in distinct ways. On this assumption, there simply would be no general predicate goodness whose essence-specifying account might prove upon analysis, as the Platonist presumes, to be

⁶ We will have occasion to doubt this below in Chapter Four §IV.

univocal. In this goodness would contrast with whiteness, such that whiteness might prove univocal when predicated across the categories while goodness simply could not be so predicated—there being, in point of fact, no such predicate.

Although some of Aristotle's remarks may tend in this direction (so, e.g., *EN* i 7, 1097b), we cannot say that he has drawn Geach's distinction in any clear or direct way. Be that as it may, we seem in the face of such a contention to have reached an unproductive stalemate. If Aristotle, or an Aristotelian (or a Geachean), wishes to insist that there is no such predicate as ' . . . being good' and so, trivially, no such univocal predicate as ' . . . being good', then the Platonist seems well within her rights to demur. At the very least nothing in Aristotle's anti-Platonic argument of *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6 offers any compelling or even clear support for such a contention. In view of that, although the Platonist could not continue blithely to assume univocity neither should she capitulate. What is needed, then, is some manner to adjudicate disputed contentions to univocity for the range of intrinsic goods. Neither side, at this juncture, has an easy way forward.

Taking that all together, we can see that the second premise of Aristotle's simple anti-Platonic argument, that good things are related as prior and posterior, is at best inconclusive. Indeed, without some ancillary support, it hardly merits consideration. With the ancillary support it may reasonably expect from the doctrine of categories, this premise does raise some provocative issues. It does not, however, settle these issues

decisively in Aristotle's favour. On the contrary, the best thing that can be said so far on its behalf is that it raises some issues which the Platonist might be fairly asked to address.

This finding may seem so far underwhelming, since one would like to move more rapidly into a position where the argument from a series of goods might be more finally appraised. If apt, however, this finding shows that any such final appraisal is premature.

Indeed, one might note, any such appraisal would be not only premature but in fact woefully so: despite the argument's extreme simplicity, we have so far managed to consider just one of its two premises. Moreover, the premise so far considered, in stark contrast to the first premise of the argument, is itself relatively simple. That premise, recall, is far more general, and not meant to involve any idiosyncratic features of goodness as such: where things $\phi_1, \phi_2, \dots, \phi_n$ are related as prior and posterior ($\pi\rho\acute{o}\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\nu$ καὶ ὕστερον), there is no Form ϕ -ness set over them. Recall further that this is a premise to which the Platonists, as Aristotle represents them, have already acceded.

Why might they have done so? Here *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6 provides not even a hint of an answer. Fortunately, a partially parallel passage in *Eudemian Ethics* i 8 goes a good deal further.

III. Series, Before, and After

In the fuller discussion of the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle makes several points omitted from the more compact statement of the argument in *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6. The text is unfortunately in a somewhat distressed state, but it is none the less clear in its essential contentions:

Further, in things having an prior and a posterior (τὸ πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον), there is no common element beyond these (παρὰ ταῦτα), something separate (χωριστόν) from them, for then there would be something prior to the first; for the common and separate element would be prior, because with its destruction the first would be destroyed as well; e.g. if the double is the first of the multiples, then the universal multiple cannot be separate, for it would be prior to the double . . . if the common element turns out to be an Idea, the sort of thing it would be if one were to make the common thing separate. For if justice is good, and so also is bravery, there is then, they say, a good itself (αὐτό τι ἀγαθόν)—for which reason they add ‘itself’ (αὐτό) to the common account (τὸν λόγον τὸν κοινόν). But what would this amount to, except that it is eternal and separate? But what is white for many days is no whiter than that which is white for a single day; so the good will not be any more good by being eternal. Hence, the common good is not identical with the Idea, for the common good belongs to all (*EE* i 8, 1218a1-15).

The statement of the argument here is noteworthy for its contrasts no less than for its similarities to the parallel passage in *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6. Most importantly, here Aristotle makes some effort to explain what is meant to be problematic about there being a Form postulated over a series. Although unlike the treatment given in the *Nicomachean Ethics* there is no representation of the first premise as *ad hominem*, we now, crucially, are given some grounds for supposing there are no Forms over series: a common Form, if separate (χωριστόν) from the entities over which it is set, would, precisely because separate, 'be something prior to the first' element of the series. Here, however, the first premise of the argument is not stated expressly at all; but it is clear that Aristotle has the same premise in view.

The argument as given in the *Eudemian Ethics* is tantalizing, but once again a bit elusive. Its exact structure is, unfortunately, more suggested than stated. One may begin by noting three discrete contentions not mentioned in the *Nicomachean Ethics* but introduced overtly here: the Idea is described as (i) something common (κοινόν), and (ii) as something beyond or beside the members of the series (παρὰ ταύτα), and (iii) as something separate (χωριστόν). Here, one must proceed with care: the contention that the Form is something beyond or beside (παρὰ) is not the same as its being separate

(χωριστόν).⁷ The latter, but not the former, implies a capacity for independent existence. In Aristotle's idiom, being beside or beyond (παρά) something suggests only that the item so described is not the same as any item in the set or indeed with the entire series taken in its entirety. This is consistent with its being existentially dependent on those items, and so with its not being, in the terms of the version of the argument given in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, prior in nature (πρῶτερον κατὰ φύσιν) to them. By contrast, the non-pleonastic addition of 'something separate (χωριστόν) from them' (or, more simply, 'and this is separate'; καὶ τοῦτο χωριστόν; *EE* i 8, 1218a1), adds the thought that Forms are more than merely distinct: they are also prior in nature at least in the sense of being able to exist independently.

Aristotle may reasonably ascribe to the Platonists just such a view. Indeed, for our purposes, we may grant that the Platonists hold, just as Aristotle represents them as holding, a full panoply of realist views about the Form of the Good. They hold, on this representation, that the Form of the Good exists; that it is common (κοινόν) to all good things; that it is set over (ἐπί) the good things there are; that it is univocally predicated of the good things to which it is common; that it is paradigmatic for them; that it is a formal cause of the goodness of the good things it is set over; and, most pertinently in

⁷ This is well illustrated in Fine (1984) and (1993). Aristotle is quite clear that a core source (perhaps *the* core source) of difficulty for Plato results from his commitment to separation. So, for instance, in comparison with Socrates, who equally sought out universal definitions: 'Nevertheless, Socrates surely never separated them from particulars; and in not separating them, he thought rightly' (*Met.* M 9, 1086b3-5). That he thought rightly, Aristotle insists, can be appreciated by observing how those who do separate universals from particulars, the Platonists, go awry (*Met.* M 9, 1086b3-5).

the present context, that it is separate ($\chi\omega\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\nu$) from them, and so capable of existing without them, though they are dependent upon it for their existence as good things (cf. *Met.* M 4, 1078b16, M 9, 1086a25). They hold, that is, that the Form of the Good is a non-natural, non-disjunctive, non-reductive, mind- and language-independent property which is essentially and context-invariantly, what it is, namely the good itself—or, as Aristotle chides the Platonists for holding (*EN* i 6, 1096a33-1096b2), it is goodness in its own right ($\tau\alpha\gamma\alpha\theta\acute{o}\nu\ \kappa\alpha\theta'\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}$).⁸

Aristotle's complaint in the present context is simple: even the Platonists deny that any such Form ϕ exists where a series of ϕ -things is concerned. What precisely, though, is the problem for series? Although this is an occasional trope of Aristotle's,⁹ and although it is clear that at least in some cases he represents the Platonists as concurring in this judgment, it is not clear why they should—or, indeed, in terms of the surviving Platonic corpus, that they in fact do. Let us, though, waive this last consideration, and assume, as seems suitable, that Aristotle is here representing them fairly and accurately.

⁸ See Chapter One §1 for Plato's commitments regarding the Form of the Good.

⁹ He advances similar considerations regarding: the better and the worse (*EN* i 6, 1096a19-35; *EE* i 8, 1218a1-8); the capacities of the soul (*DA* ii 3, 414b19-415a11); citizens and constitutions (*Pol.* iii 1, 1275a34-38); and, in a passage to which he here draws our attention in our passage from *EN* i 6, to numbers (*Met.* B 3, 999a6-10). We do not come away with a clear notion of the sort of series here envisaged, nor even of the sort of priority-posteriority relation he (or he, together with the relevant Platonists) have in view. On the contrary, we have a sort of motley.

On this assumption, we may ask: what is the precise problem about a series of goods? What, in particular, does the *Eudemian Ethics* add to the picture given by the *Nicomachean Ethics*? Here is a reasonable first conjecture:¹⁰

. . . we are provided with what the *ad hominem* argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics* did not and did not formally need to provide, a demonstration of the general premiss about P-series [scil. a series of entities arranged by some priority-posteriority relation]. It is this. In such a series one of the terms is first in the order of priority (for example, the double in a series of multiples); but if there were a separate Idea (say, multiplicity) which embraced this series it would be prior to all the terms, so that what had *ex hypothesi* been first would no longer be first. The simplicity of this demonstration must not make us suspect it: it is perfectly valid, since according to the theory of Ideas the Idea would have to rank as one of the terms of the series.

According to this approach, Aristotle suggests that if a Form ϕ were both beyond (*παρά*) and separate from (*χωριστόν*) the members of a ϕ series, then 'there would be something prior to the first' member of the series.

We can offer the following expansion:

- (1) If a, b, c, \dots, n are arraigned as prior and posterior, then there is a ϕ set over them only if it is prior to the entire series.

¹⁰ Lloyd #

- (2) If ϕ is prior to the entire series, then it is also prior to each of its members.
- (3) So, if (2), then ϕ will be prior to a , the first member of the series.
- (4) If ϕ is prior to a , then a , the first member of the series a, b, c, \dots, n will be posterior to ϕ .
- (5) If a , the first member of the series a, b, c, \dots, n , is posterior to ϕ , then a will not be the first member of the series.
- (6) So, if there is a Form ϕ over the series a, b, c, \dots, n , a will and will not be the first item in that series.
- (7) So, there is no Form ϕ set over the series a, b, c, \dots, n .
- (8) To this we may add the categorial appeal of *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6, thereby applying this result to goodness.
- (9) The categories of being form a series arraigned as prior and posterior.
- (10) If (9), then if goodness is predicated across the categories, predications of goodness will form a series.
- (11) So, there is no Form ϕ set over the categories. (7, 9)
- (12) So, there is no single Form, Goodness, set over the series of goods predicated across the categories.

That is, 'what had *ex hypothesi* been first would no longer be first.'

It behoves us to lay out the expanded form of the argument in this way, since it lays bare where this approach goes awry. While a simple, valid argument would be

most welcome in the context, it takes little effort to see that the argument here expanded is neither. The question of simplicity is partly a function of its clarity and directness, but we can see that we have already come a good distance from the simple two-premise argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As for validity, the matter is more complex.

It would, perhaps, be useful if some such argument could be shown valid, because then we would have a good reason to see why the Platonists might have agreed, as Aristotle represents them as having agreed, to there being a problem about Forms for series. After all, the strong implication seems to be that this would be a special problem, one attending to members of a series, or more broadly for members standing in priority-posteriority relations, which is not also a problem for level-specific kinds, that is, kinds like various species under the genus animal. Thus, for instance, if nothing which is a human is any more or less a human than any other human, then we would expect the Platonist to posit a Form of Humanity, arrayed over those humans, even if, due to the reasons currently under exploration, she demurred for level-ordered kinds, like numbers. One virtue of the expansion of the argument offered is precisely that it has this result: it reveals, if sound, a problem for Forms for series which is not also a problem for level-specific kinds. It locates a contradiction by making the (putatively) first member of a series both first and not first in that series.

Unfortunately, the argument as expanded has no such consequence: it is invalid. The problem owes to an equivocation on the notion of priority. One notion of priority

we may term sequential-priority. On this notion, priority is given by a sort of successor function, such that, for instance, any given natural number is prior to the one which follows it, and then, by transitivity, to every subsequent number in the series. This is a far cry from the notion of priority to which Aristotle has appealed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely priority in nature (κατὰ φύσιν), which we have glossed in terms of an asymmetrical implication of existence. More to the point, the notion of priority in nature is at play in the first three premises of our expanded argument. This, then, must be the sense of (4), in which the first member of a given series will be (along with every other member of the series) posterior to the postulated Form set over them. The notion of priority required for (5), however, shifts abruptly to sequential priority: nothing can be first in a series if it is sequentially prior to another member of the series. Nothing, however, precludes a first member (like any other member) of a series from being posterior in nature to a postulated universal set over it. Given, then, that we have distinct notions at play in the argument—neither of which entails the other—the expanded version equivocates, and so turns out invalid.

A Platonist may then say that the putative contradiction recorded in (6) is simply false, so that there will be no contradiction involved in the postulation of a Form for series. What (6) concludes is just this: So, if there is a Form ϕ over the series a, b, c, \dots, n , a will and will not be the first item in that series. The Platonist will now rightly reject (6), because a will after all be the first member in the series. This first member of the

series $a, b, c, \dots n$ will indeed be posterior to the postulated Form set over the series; but this posteriority will be posteriority in nature ($\kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\alpha}$ φύσιν). Hence, to avoid a manifest equivocation, (4) will now have to read:

(4*) If ϕ is prior in nature to a , then a , the first member of the series $a, b, c, \dots n$ will be posterior in nature to ϕ .

and (5) will turn out false. (5) holds that if a , the first member of the series $a, b, c, \dots n$, is posterior to ϕ , then a will not be the first member of the series. For a can be posterior in nature to ϕ , even while a is the first in a sequence ordered in terms of sequential priority. It follows then that (6) cannot be derived: it is not the case that if there is a Form ϕ over the series $a, b, c, \dots n$, a will and will not be the first item in that series.

In any event, this is what a Platonist can and should say in response to the expanded argument of the *Eudemian Ethics*. There is simply no contradiction derivable from the commitments ascribed to the Platonist thus far; and there is thus no reason for her to concur with the judgment that there is a special problem about goodness.

Indeed, the arguments offered thus far invite rejoinders on all fronts. First, good things do not seem to be ordered in any discernible sequential-priority order. In this, good things do not seem relevantly like the numbers series to which Aristotle likens them.

Indeed, they seem, on the contrary, unlike the number series in this respect. Second, any priority-posteriority relation which may seem to obtain between members of a sequence and a Form ϕ set over them fails to generate anything approaching a

contradiction forcing the abandonment of Platonic realism as characterised. So far, then, Aristotle's polemics seem unjustified. Or, more mildly, nothing justifying Aristotle's confidence regarding the security of his anti-Platonic conception of goodness is readily ascertainable from the texts in which he articulates them.

IV. A Conjectural Expansion

This result may seem in various ways unhappy. If Aristotle's polemics are hollow, then perhaps his anti-Academic postures about goodness should simply be set aside. Perhaps, then, we should revert to the earlier finding of Cook Wilson, who concluded that the discussion of Forms in *Eudemian Ethics* i 8 'is an entire misunderstanding'?¹¹

The point at issue in our discussion is this: why do series present a special problem for good things? As we have seen, this issue breaks down into a variety of sub-issues, each involving its own constraints. On the one hand, we would like to respect the report that the Academics themselves acknowledged a special problem about Forms set over series. It seems *prima facie* unlikely that Aristotle would make up such a report out of whole cloth. Indeed, the tenor of the argument of *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6 seems to be just this: now that the Academics have already agreed to there being a

¹¹ Wilson (1904, 256 n. 1): 'Eudemus' attempt to explain this case in *Eud. Eth.* I. viii, where he reproduces *Nic. Eth.* I. vi.1096a 17 *sqq.*, is an entire misunderstanding.' (Wilson is here assuming, as was common in his day, that the *Eudemian Ethics* was not by Aristotle, but by Aristotle's pupil, Eudemus of Rhodes.)

problem about Forms set over series, they need now only to be shown that predications of goodness stand in a sufficiently clear priority-posteriority relation to qualify as relevantly series-like. So, it would be good to accept Aristotle's report as basically apt. Still, on the other hand, we would not wish to determine in advance that the Platonists faced an insurmountable objection in this regard, especially as regards the univocity of goodness. Surely, in any case, we are not entitled to any such conclusion before coming to terms with the argument to which Aristotle is alluding but not reproducing. We are in effect invited to peer into the Academy to witness a discussion we cannot hear. Without the benefit of this information, we are unlikely to come to determinate answers about the force of Aristotle's criticisms.

That acknowledged, it may yet be that we have the resources in Aristotle's texts to offer a conjectural expansion of his objection. We may yet discover a plausible but non-devastating argument against Plato, one which registers a legitimate philosophical objection against the Form of the Good, but one to which Plato may yet have the resources to reply.

The expansion to be offered is in one way no more conjectural than what we have already encountered; it too finds some mooring in the text of *Eudemian Ethics* i 8; and it too takes seriously the suggestion of *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6 that any postulated Form would need to be prior in nature to the entities over which it is set, in precisely this sense: the Form ϕ could exist without there being any ϕ -things, but there could be

no ϕ -things were there no Form ϕ . So much conforms precisely to the version of Platonic Realism we have characterized and which seems, on the balance, the understanding of Platonic Forms shared by both Plato and Aristotle.¹² More to the point, it reflects the fact that in the *Eudemian Ethics*, no less than the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle has a notion of priority in nature (κατὰ φύσιν) in view: ‘for the common and separable element would be prior, because with its destruction the first would be destroyed as well’ (*EE* i 8, 1218a3-4). Taking these commitments together with three pregnant remarks, one from each text, we find a plausible but non-devastating argument emerging from the texts.

The pregnant remarks are these. First from *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6, we find Aristotle concluding that there is no Form of Goodness such that it is ‘something common, universal, and one’ (κοινόν τι καθόλου καὶ ἓν; *EN* i 6, 1096a28). From *Eudemian Ethics* i 8, we have Aristotle characterising the Form of the Good as ‘common’ (κοινόν), ‘beside’ (or ‘beyond’; παρὰ), and separate (χωριστόν) (*EE* i 8, 1218a2-3). Finally, the Form of the Good is itself good (‘they add ‘itself’ to the common account’; τὸ οὖν αὐτὸ πρόσκειται πρὸς τὸν λόγον τὸν κοινόν; *EE* i 8, 1218a11).

We have, then, the following constellation of characterizations, emerging from the two texts taken in tandem:

- Commonality: a Form Goodness itself is set over all good things.

¹² See Chapter One §1 for Plato’s commitments regarding the Form of the Good.

- Univocity: this common Form is single, such that it provides the non-disjunctive, essence-specify account what it is to be good.

Together, Commonality and Univocity entail:

- One Over Many: there is exactly one Form of Goodness set over all good things.

To these we may add:

- Priority in nature: The Form of Goodness could exist without there being any good things, but there could be no good things were there no Form of Goodness.
- Essential self-predication: The Form of the Good is itself good in its own right (καθ' αὐτό).

With these resources, one can develop an argument which fits the basic requisites of an adequate understanding of the dialectic between Plato and Aristotle on this point.

The conjectural expansion then, is this:

- (1) If a, b, c, \dots, n ϕ -things are arranged as prior and posterior, then there is a ϕ set over them only if a it is prior to the entire series (by priority in nature) and (b) it is itself ϕ (by essential self-predication).
- (2) If ϕ is itself ϕ , and all ϕ -things are arranged in a series, then ϕ is a member of that series of ϕ -things.

- (3) So, if $a, b, c, \dots n$ ϕ -things are arranged as prior and posterior and there is a ϕ set over them, then ϕ is a member of the series prior to the first member of the series.
- (4) There is exactly one Form of Goodness set over all good things.
- (5) So, if ϕ is a member of the series prior to the first member of the series, then there is a ϕ^* over the series $\phi, a, b, c, \dots n$.
- (6) If ϕ^* is itself ϕ , then it is a member of the series $\phi, a, b, c, \dots n$ prior to the first member of the series.
- (7) By repeated application of (6), there is forever another member the series, which is itself a member of the series.
- (8) So, there is an Idea ϕ set over the series of ϕ -things only if there is forever another member of that series.

The categories of being form a series of good things arranged as prior and posterior.

So, there is no single Form of Goodness itself set over series of good things.

In sum, each projected common universal generates another in its wake. So, there will not be one, but just as a critic of the theory of Forms says in the *Parmenides*, 'no longer one, but 'indefinitely many' ($\alpha\pi\epsilon\iota\omicron\alpha \tau\omicron \pi\lambda\eta\theta\omicron\varsigma$; *Parm.* 132ab2). So much, of course, would also be a familiar Aristotelian complaint against the theory of Forms.

Note too that it no longer implicates Aristotle in the obvious equivocation that we have identified in our first expansion. That equivocation involved two senses of

priority, one the sort Forms bear to the instances arrayed under them (priority in nature), and the other the sort the number three bears to the number four and all subsequent numbers (sequential priority). The point in this expansion is rather that self-predication implicates the Form into the series itself, thereby generating an infinite regress. This it does in effect by using the Form's self-predication to force it into a sequential priority which it would not otherwise be thought to have. That is, if we are Platonists and are otherwise not inclined to treat the Form of Number as itself a number alongside the other numbers, then we will none the less be constrained do so, if we also treat it as self-predicative and then also assume, sensibly enough before Cantor, that anything which is a number must be located somewhere on the number line, before all the numbers which follow it and after all which proceed it, if any. If we think that no Form can be so located on the number line, then that is only a reason for doubting that the Form of Number, if there is such a Form, is self-predicative. So, as far as this argument goes, Plato is not jockeyed into any immediate contradiction. Instead, an unpleasant if familiar regress looms.

If this is correct, then we are pushed in other directions when we come to evaluate the argument. We may set aside discussion of (9), which concerns the issue already assayed of how or whether good things are arrayed as by some priority-posteriority relation. This reconstruction, like those which have already been attempted, has various merits and demerits. On the one hand, Aristotle does not allude

to a regress in either of our passages. Still, each of the core premises and assumptions in this argument is stated in our passages, and in this reconstruction, we do end up with an anti-Academic argument which is both familiar and formidable. It is familiar, in that—as has already been noted—it bears a family resemblance to the third-man argument of the *Parmenides*, which argument Aristotle himself discusses several times over (*Met.* A 9, 990b17, Z 13, 1039a2, M 4, 1079a13; *Soph. Ref.* 22, 178b36). So, here at least, we have some trace of a live intra-Academic debate, one which we know exercised both Plato and Aristotle, if in different ways.

What we do not know, if we may indulge this conjecture as a hypothesis, is this: why should the existence of a series make a discernible difference? One thought would be that the third-man argument has always, in different ways, traded upon a precarious interaction between three theses, namely a one-over-many thesis, to the effect that over any group of ϕ -things $a, b, c, \dots n$ there is a ϕ set over them; a uniqueness thesis, to the effect that there is exactly one Form ϕ set over the ϕ -things; and some version of self-predication, such that the Form ϕ is itself a ϕ -thing. The interaction is precarious, because taken some ways, these theses are actually contradictory,¹³ whereas taken other ways they are consistent, but difficult to apply such that they generate a vicious regress—especially a regress which is both vicious and non-epistemic. Moreover, it is difficult to see, on some formulations of these theses, why there is a regress at all.

¹³ This was a point fairly made by Sellars (#) in response to a formulation of the third man owing to Vlastos (#).

This is where the presence of a series alters the terrain somewhat. Once a series is in view, with each generation of a new ϕ -thing there is something new, given essential self-predication, which is itself perforce a member of the series. That is, since everything which is a member of a series is essentially so ordered, then in order to qualify as a ϕ -thing in the first instance, the newly generated ϕ -thing must itself also stand in the ordering relation. To take an example favourable to Aristotle's point so understood, if there is a Form of number set over the naturals, then, given essential self-predication, it is itself a natural Number. Every natural number stands in some essential ordering relation to every other. Hence, the generated natural must be itself somewhere in the series. There is, then, of course, given the one-over-many thesis, something set over this set of naturals. With each new application of the theses, we see that there cannot be exactly one entity set over the series, but indefinitely many. The consequence of the repeated application is, so to speak, to shove each instance of the ϕ -thing-itself back down into the series. This ϕ -thing will be both prior to the other members of the series in the sense of being prior in nature (*κατὰ φύσιν*), and it will be sequentially prior to all those which follow it.

To be clear, the point here is not that the conjectured reconstruction for series represents an improvement to the third-man argument; rather, it is an argument in the family of the third-man argument, and so one whose provenance we can readily recognize. More importantly, it is a reconstruction which does not trade on any

equivocation regarding priority or posteriority. Earlier, the Platonist had an easy rebuttal—one would say a rather too easy rebuttal—to Aristotle’s argument, namely that the Form of the Good might be prior in nature to the other good things without thereby being sequentially prior or posterior to them. There was no contradiction, and this was the core shortcoming of the proposed reconstruction. Here we find no contradiction either, but that is a point in its favour: there is no contradiction. There is none the less a genuine problem for the Platonists, and it is one with which we know they have wrestled.

V. Concluding Considerations

By the time we have reached this conjectural expansion, we have travelled a good distance from the simple, two-premise argument of *Nicomachean Ethics* i 6. That simple argument held (i) that there are no Forms set over items arranged in a series; and (ii) that good things are themselves so arranged; with the result that (iii) there is no Form of the Good. When reflecting on the relative complexity of our final conjecture, one may have the sense that we have travelled rather too far, that the meagre texts before us cannot bear the hermeneutical weight we have heaped upon them.

This may be so. On the other hand, we do find all of the elements of our final reconstruction in our texts; we find, moreover, in their interaction, an argument worthy of both Plato and Aristotle. This is an argument which should give the Platonists a

pause, but it is not an argument which Aristotle can promulgate as decisive against them. He might, though, as he does, fairly report the Platonists as having been conciliatory in response to it, even though they might well, as indeed they should, push back in particular against Aristotle's contention that good things form a discernible series given by some suitably precise priority-posteriority relation.

As for the complexity of the final formulation: we can hardly expect the Academic dialectic pertaining to the metaphysics of goodness to have been anything but complex, however simple and economical those friends of ours who introduced the Forms meant the Form of the Good to be.